

Electric eyesore awaits cleanup

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By RON SELAK JR. Tribune Chronicle

WARREN - What remains of the old Mahoningside power plant frightens and discourages Ken Perrine.

A grandfather of four, Perrine says the site is a "danger to the community," with its two vacant buildings and large hole in the ground.

"The way I look at it, it's an embarrassment to the community," said Perrine of 856 Tod Ave. N.W. "It's a reflection on the people that live here."

A large yellow and rust-colored piece of excavating equipment sits idle. Its fork is missing, and the windshield is nearby on the ground.

Debris, including a second large piece of equipment, is scattered around the Summit Avenue site, adjacent to the Mahoning River. The site is secured with fence.

"City officials don't have some sort of plan," Perrine, 47, said. "What is the next phase that they need to do to get this thing finished to a point that it's presentable?"

The site remains in limbo five years after much of the plant was demolished and only days after a former city official pleaded guilty for his involvement in steering the demolition contract to a local company in exchange for a bribe.

The next phase is to remove from the site three piles of dirt contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, Community Development Director Michael D. Keys said.

PCB, a known carcinogen, is linked to electrical equipment, such as transformers and compressors.

"The EPA is ready to come," Keys said. "As soon as they set their schedule, they are taking it (the dirt)."

Mark Durno of the U.S. EPA said that in late 2000 and early 2001, the agency funded a cleanup of high-level PCBs in the basement of the facility and a portion of the sediments in the Mahoning River. After that, the site was referred back to the

Ohio EPA to evaluate the remainder of the property for any other potentially hazardous substances.

Later in 2001, Durno said the Ohio EPA found PCB levels above regulatory limits in the three soil piles, which include debris removed from the building when the twin smokestacks were imploded in 1999.

The smokestack demolition is connected to an elaborate bribery scheme for construction and demolition contracts involving two city officials.

Former Warren building official James Lapmardo recently pleaded guilty to one count of racketeering for his role in the bribery scheme.

Lapmardo is accused of taking about \$100,000 in cash and services in exchange for assisting six local contractors in obtaining hundreds of thousands of dollars in construction and demolition contracts in Warren. One of the contracts was for Mahoningside.

The other official has not yet been named.

The Ohio EPA mandated that the city remove the piles. However, the city didn't have the \$1.8 million to pay for it.

Durno said now the agency is negotiating with past and current property owners to determine whether they are willing to conduct, or at least assist in the cleanup. If the past property owners fail to participate, the U.S. EPA has stated it will pursue federal funding and conduct a U.S. EPA-led removal action, Keys said according to a letter dated in April 2003.

"The U.S. EPA has been developing a strategy to deal with the materials for about a year," Durno said.

The U.S. EPA has received its budget "piecemeal," this year putting a strain on its ability to deal with this and other sites, Durno said.

Having PCBs in a concentration of more than 50 parts per million is considered

hazardous. There is additional concern of the elevated PCB levels because of the proximity to the Mahoning River.

"The final agreed upon cleanup level will likely be less than 50 parts per million," Durno said.

According to a letter dated January 2004, the city agrees to provide the field services to load out the soil piles in exchange for the U.S. EPA providing transportation and disposal cost.

The city also agreed to provide confirmation sampling at the end of the removal.

Once the soil is taken away, Keys said a second environmental assessment will be conducted to determine if the site is free of contaminants.

If the site comes back clean, the city will place new backfill into the hole and seed the area. Keys said he is hoping to receive a grant from the Clean Ohio Assistance Fund to help in backfilling the area.

There are no current plans to demolish the remaining buildings at the plant site.

The city became involved with the cleanup after it took over the facility from Stychno Corp.

It has been looking to restore the former Mahoningside site to make it attractive for economic development.

Operations at the plant ceased in 1961.

The city has committed \$2.5 million to the Mahoningside project, Keys said, excluding about \$1.5 million worth of in-kind services from the U.S. EPA.

The funding has included a \$250,000 donation from Ohio Edison, a \$202,000 loan from the Ohio Department of Development and \$1.3 million loan from the Ohio Water Development Authority, which is payable over the next 10 years, Keys said.

Keys said it would take about another \$800,000 to complete the site. No general fund money has been used to clean up the site.

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